

Hunters Urged to Shoot Grouse, Give Ducks a Chance to Recoup

By Art Smith

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DUCK HUNTERS this year "will thrill to the incoming flock as they rise in the blinds and bang away as always," Roger Latham wrote in a recent column in The Pittsburgh Press.

"But every time a duck folds and falls, it could easily be a part of the slow count-down to the end of this great sport."

Only recently, on a goose hunting trip, Latham and I discovered that we both had wondered somewhat wistfully in print whether it might not be wise to close out all water fowl gunning for at least one year to give the birds a chance to breed their way back to numerical strength, great enough to withstand the pressure of hunters' guns.

Latham, a biologist with the Pennsylvania Fish and Game Commission for more than 20 years, had written his reflective piece after studying the testimony of John Gottschalk, director of the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, before the House Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife.

GOTTSCHALK HAS SAID that last year "drought and heavy kills has reduced the duck breeding population to the lowest level since reliable surveys started in 1947."

"He gave an analysis of the mallard situation," Latham wrote. "He said that a breeding population of six million mallards would produce about seven million young for a total fall flight of 13 million."

"He explained that about 2.6 million of these would be lost to natural mortalities; about 1.5 million would be shot in Canada and almost four million by United States gunners. The five million left to return to the nesting grounds would produce about 2.9 million as a harvestable surplus for the following year."

"In contrast, Gottschalk said, if the mallard were



Trumpeter swan and cygnets

permitted to build up a breeding population of 11 million, hunters could take about six million birds each year.

"And, according to Gottschalk, this can be accomplished quickly by permitting 20 per cent more to go back north in the spring of 1966 than we did in the spring of 1965."

MANY HUNTERS, Latham continued, "hailed the end of the drought in the prairie provinces of Canada as the salvation for water fowl. They visualized extra millions coming down the flyways this fall because of all the nesting areas available where there had been only dry potholes before."

"But the prairie provinces and all their marshes and ponds were singularly empty this spring and improved water conditions only accentuated the scarcity of breeders."

"Moreover, weather dur-

ing the nesting season was awful. It stayed cold and wet in the spring and the water raised from several inches to several feet during the height of the nesting. Nests and broods were lost by the tens of thousands. Re-nesting, although fairly successful, did not come close to making up the loss.

"Mallards and pintails seemed to be hurt especially. Slightly more lenient hunting regulations in 1964 cut the mallard population to 21 per cent below that of 1963. Continued severe harvests could further reduce the number of breeders."

"THIS BUSINESS of duck management makes you wonder. Department directors put all kinds of pressure on the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife to provide longer seasons and more lenient bag limits in spite of the threat to the future of water fowl hunting. They claim that a tight season or no season at all would work 'hardship' on duck clubs, guides, etc."

"This undoubtedly is true, but what will happen to the income of these people if the ducks fly that last mile?"

"These people even say that closing or curtailing seasons would discourage duck hunters and many would quit altogether. Maybe this would be a good

idea until the water fowl have had a chance to make a proper comeback."

"It seems to me that the thinking sportsmen would be willing to substitute grouse or pheasants or quail shooting for at least one season if it would mean a substantial increase in the flight of ducks and the future security of the resource."